Moral Seascapes

On the Ethics and Aesthetics of Maritime Emergency

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7. Scheerbart on the Beach: Visiting *The Sea-Serpent*

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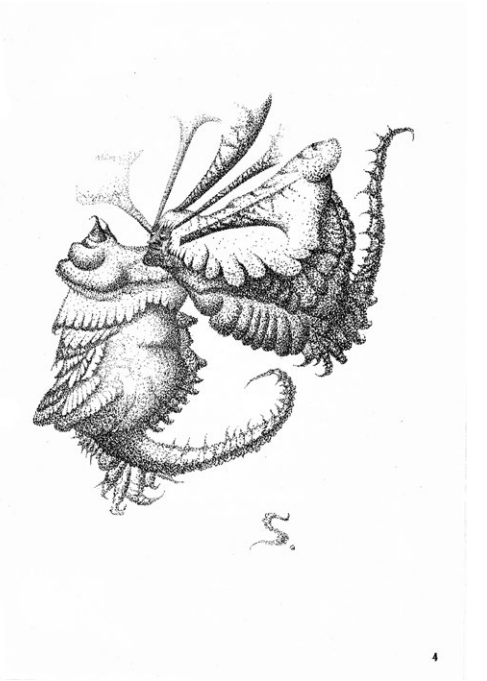
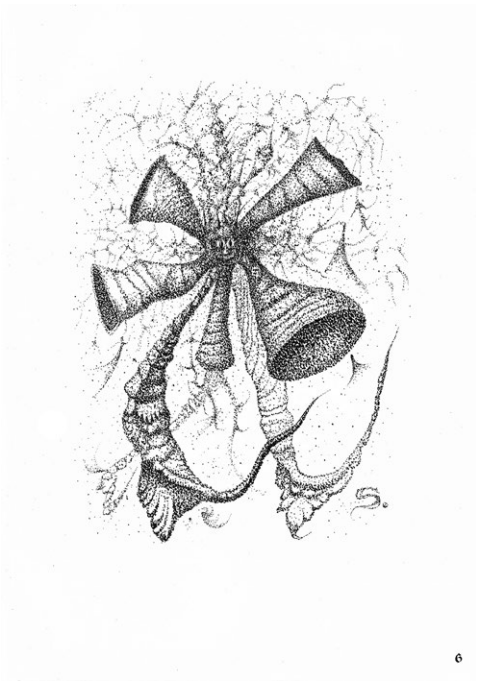
In 1913 Salomo Friedlaender offered a sensitive comment on the work of his friend and writer-colleague Paul Scheerbart: "He practices 'bestowing virtue' more naively than Zarathustra. Those benefiting from the bestowing process haven't any idea what's been bestowed. […] [H]e plays being common; he's always uncommon, out of the ordinary." (Friedlaender, 2006: 376)

Scheerbart's artistic legacy is in truth anything but ordinary or "common," which is to say: generally accessible. Rather, it seems that, for the sake of gaining an entire range of unconventional impressions, his public has to develop a unique sensorium, a unique sense of humor. The extraterrestrial menagerie, for example, that Scheerbart—a gifted draftsman—prepared for his *Jenseits-Galerie* shows strange creatures, structured in pointillist fashion, sometimes shaped like coral or dripstone, sometimes supplied with enormous funnels. (fig. 7.1–4) Scheerbart refers to these figures as "anormal" precisely because of their sole humanoid trait: their facial forms, distinctly untypical on account of their innately cosmical domain—a domain located beyond a Neptunian orbit. (Scheerbart, 1907: [1])

The literary gifts Scheerbart bestows are also eyebrow-raising, starting with satirical generic labels such as, among many others, "hippopotamus novel" and "show-off novel;" "astral-pantomime" and "hangover-poetry;" "drama for world-improvers" and "telegram-novelette." No less remarkable are his real-life enthusiasms, which he also furnished with literary documentation. He thus tinkered for years on a *perpetuum mobile*, and his fascination with glass architecture bordered on the obsessional. Inspired by Scheerbart's manifesto *Glasarchitektur* of 1914, Bruno Taut designed the pavilion of German glass manufacturers for the Cologne *Werkbund* fair held that same year, dedicating the pavilion to Scheerbart. Thanks to being venerated by artists and architects close to the "Glass Chain" and Bauhaus groups, Scheerbart in fact left lasting traces in architectural history. His name became a synonym for the modern utopia of building in glass.





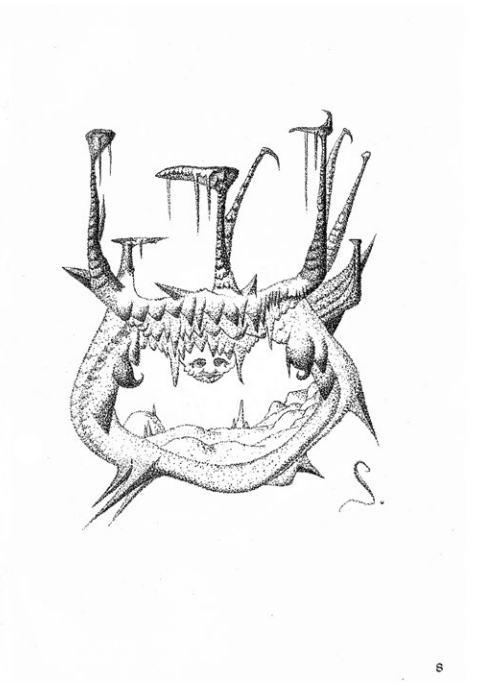


Fig. 7.1–4.
Paul Scheerbart, *Jenseits-Galerie*, 1907 (Berlin, Oesterheld & Co.).

With his recent rediscovery, owing a great deal to translations (often for the first time) of his texts into English, Scheerbart has now come into focus as representing an ecological and critical post-humanistic stance. (Svendsen, 2012: xiv) Exemplary in this respect is the asteroid-novel *Lesabéndio* (1913), which Walter Benjamin considered Scheerbart's most important work and granted eminent political relevance in his cultural theory. (Drews, 2022: 373–389) *Lesabéndio* is a serene piece of extraterrestrial literature, the narrative of the social, artistic, and technical development of dwellers on a planet named Pallas. Benjamin prizes this astral species first because it has learned to use technology in a constructive manner, which is to say without dominating and exploiting nature; (Benjamin, 2019: 631) and second because it has, laughing, turned down the humanistic principle of "humanlikeness." (Benjamin, 1999: 733) Instead of being born, Pallasians come into the world in nutshells. They are sexless, and their "dehumanized" names (Ibid.) are based on their initial babble. Their rubbery, elastic, tubular bodies have sucker-feet, and their eyes are adjustable for both microscopic and telescopic use. Individually and collectively, they are capable of extraordinary corporeal metamorphoses; at the end of their lives, they merge physically and spiritually into one another. The work's titular figure takes this capability to the next, cosmical level: through the idea of a grandiose tower-construction, Lesabéndio initiates the planet's conversion from a double-star into a unity, merging into it after this has taken place. In becoming a star under an architectural sign, Lesabéndio alters both the life, thinking, and feeling of the Pallasians and the interstellar order of the asteroids. This technically catalyzed new organization of both nature and the individual and collective bodies is what sparks Benjamin's energetic praise of Scheerbart's unique ability "to point out the revolutionary character of technical labor." (Benjamin, 2016: 368) Namely, in "To the Planetarium," the last section of *One-Way Street*, Benjamin observes that

> technology is the mastery of not nature but of the relation between nature and man. Men as a species completed their development thousands of years ago; but mankind as a species is just beginning his. In technology, a *physis* is being organized through which mankind's contact with the cosmos takes a new and different form from that which it had in nations and families. (Benjamin, 1996: 426)

But if what is at stake is the development of humankind "as a species," then the question emerges of the status of the new cosmical organization of *physis* if human beings continue to live on Earth. For what distinguished Scheerbart's creatures in *Lesabéndio* is the fact that the Pallasians' physical constitution and cosmic evolution correlate with

the constitution and evolution of their home planet. The ecological point of the asteroid-novel consists precisely in this narrow interchange between Pallasian bodies and heavenly body. The Pallasians can discard everything "humanlike" because they live on Pallas, not Earth. Hence, if being a Pallasian means living on Pallas and being human inversely means living on Earth, how are we meant to conceive of "dehumanization" under terrestrial, material conditions?

Scheerbart is already working on his cosmological project, the alteration of Earth-dwellers, in his early writing. The present essay will focus on a text of his that has hardly been examined until now, *Die Seeschlange. Ein See-Roman* (*The Sea-Serpent: A Sea-Novel*, 1901), which can be considered an entrée to the wider project. On the one hand, Scheerbart here explores the relationship between Planet Earth and its human inhabitants, offering a critique of their bourgeois-humanistic manifestation. But in doing so, his starting point is neither the human being nor nature, hence the two ideal-typical poles of terrestrial causal connection; rather, it is the medium that draws up and regulates these poles. From Scheerbart's perspective, this medium is very clearly architecture, or technique in general. For this reason, also at stake in the novel, on the other hand, is exploring architecture's metaphysical and ethical potential. These two thematic strands are intertwined in the mythic sea-serpent, conceptualized in a tripartite manner: as the vehicle for pan-psychic cosmology; as a higher-order fiction; and as planetary architecture. All three of these conceptual levels have elements that suggest an understanding of this maritime creature as the figuration of a critique of humanism. The sea-novel thus reveals an important moment in Scheerbart's poetics—a moment we might describe as his posthuman turn.

From Sea Monsters to the New Blue Flower

In the early 19th century, the idea of a great sea-serpent sparked the imagination of scientists, lay people, and various lovers of the high seas. Natural scientists such as Louis Agassiz and Henry Lee seriously pondered its existence. A reptile of primeval proportions hovered before their eyes, the idea quickly placing maritime adventurers on the agenda. As Natascha Adamowsky indicates, despite failed hunting expeditions, spectacular exhibits were presented:

> One famous case is the 1842 exhibition of a 35 meters long sea-snake skeleton in the hall of Berlin's Royal Iron Foundry, displayed as an unprecedented sensation. 'Unfortunately' it quickly became clear that

> the bones belonged to at least five different fossilized ancient whales, which a Dr. Alfred C. Koch had put together with extraordinary skill and fantasy. (Adamowsky, 2017: 121) (fig. 7.5)

Enthusiasm for news about the monster endured over the following decades. It was said to have pursued ships and haunted harbors for days on end; hundreds of people claimed they had seen it. Jules Verne used relevant newspaper reports for the framing plot of *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Seas.* (1869) For Gloria Meynen, the narrative technique at work here aligned reality with fiction, did away with the "border between the novel's world and that of its readers." (Meynen, 2020: 268) Meynen emphasizes that within this "technique of seamless montage and convergence," (Ibid.: 273) Verne's narrative strategy comes together with the tinkering technique of various sea monster producers—Dr. Koch was far from the only person with such entrepreneurial ambition.

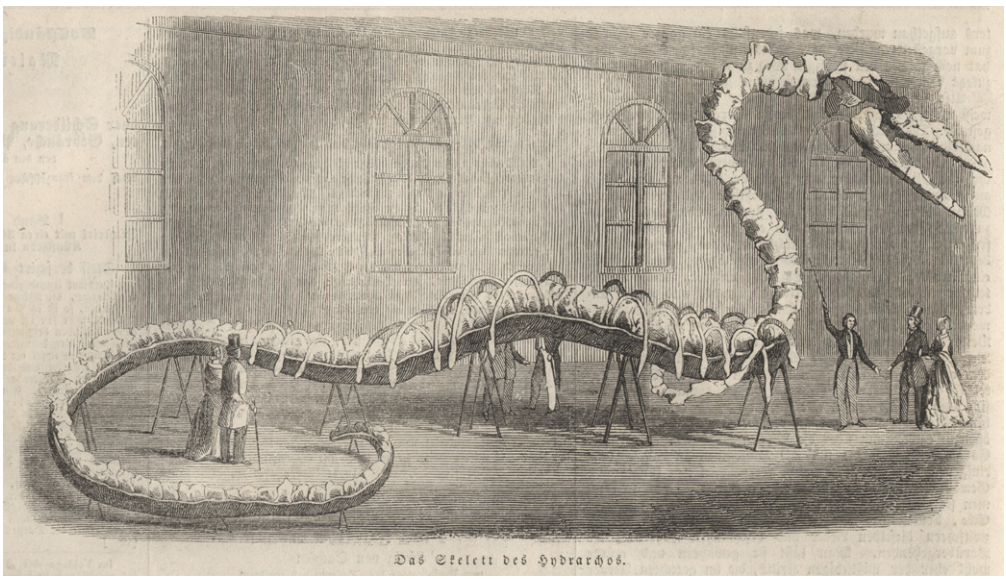


Fig. 7.5.
Carl August Reinhardt, *The Skeleton of the Hydrarchos*, Leipziger *Illustrirte Zeitung*, 131, VI (January 3, 1846): 16. © Deutsches Historisches Museum.

Finally, we should note that the 19th-century sea monster is mainly a hybrid construction: physically-materially made out of diverse objects, compounds, and bones of various animals; and in a literary sphere built from a textual complex including myths, fables, historiographical works, newspaper reports, and natural-scientific treatises. Scheerbart's sea-novel calls for a mode of reading adept with such chimeras. Namely, the Scheerbartian sea-serpent is a skillfully "constructed" hybrid located at a juncture between literature and architecture.

Large snakes and the fabulous creatures associated with them play a central role in Scheerbart's early poetics. Stefan Tetzlaff has suggested reading the Scheerbartian artistic approach in a framework of "neoromanticism," since he sees major affinities with the irony and self-reflexive poetics of Novalis, Friedrich Schlegel, Ludwig Tieck, and E.T.A. Hoffmann. The core of Romanticism's "new mythology," Tetzlaff argues, a shared inventory of themes, figures, and literary procedures, is a "physical approach to the supernatural" that we find as well in Scheerbart. (Tetzlaff, 2010: 260) To be sure, as Tetzlaff emphasizes, Scheerbart moves past mere adaption of Romantic procedure, modifying and potentiating it and seeking his own style. In the tale "The Blue Flower" (1902), he thus declares, referring to Novalis's famous trope, that "the old blue flowers are all withered and no longer sufficiently pungent [*scharf*]. Not much can be done with such dry weed—for human beings even absolutely nothing, for they have gradually […] become accustomed to the different poisons." (Scheerbart, 1990b: 181)

For Scheerbart, who in his younger years was an art and architecture critic, one path to developing new artistic approaches was to study symbolism in the visual arts. He was especially fond of, precisely, Hermann Hendrich's painting *Die blaue Blume* (*The Blue Flower*, 1893), which he declared the best modern program-painting created in the early 1890s. According to Scheerbart, Hendrich here demonstrated "that our age's artist does not leave theorizing to the critics" but rather "shapes his artworks into theories and his theories into artworks." (Scheerbart, 2021b: 91) And Scheerbart sees the art resulting from this process as resembling "a large polyp whose tentacles reach out on all sides." (Ibid.: 89) Here the polyp has advanced to become the heraldic animal in a new, theoretically informed fantastical art.

The neoromantic *bestarium* begun with polyps is soon expanded to include dragons and giant snakes; but for Scheerbart all these figures only emerge "out of fantastical longing to represent the other." (Scheerbart, 2021a: 96) The poetical function of Scheerbart's non-human fantastical species is to replace the old Romanticism's "dry weeds." The sea-serpent is part of this species. It is the new sly pungent blue flower that is all the more important since what is at stake for Scheerbart is a critical approach to human beings "accustomed to the different poisons."

Into the "Temple of Interiority"

According to Mechthild Rausch, the underlying impetus in Scheerbart's writing is a "pietistic striving for personal access to God, an overpowering experience of revival, the rebirth of a new human being." (Rausch, 1997: 82) In addition, for Scheerbart it is astral creatures like

Lesabéndio who "arrive at what is most human," so that the striving for renewal needs to be understood, from the start, "*ex negativo*." (Ibid.: 36) And since the tendency to ascend is dangerously close to intoxication, the transforming process needs firm ground beneath one's feet (Ibid.: 180)—architecture fulfilling this function of sustainment and grounding. For just this reason, as Benjamin observes, Scheerbart placed "the greatest value on housing his 'people' […] in buildings befitting their station." (Benjamin, 1999: 733)

Against this backdrop, it is hardly surprising that *The Sea-Serpent* takes a great deal of time to introduce its title figure, instead unfolding an entire cosmology as a housing problem. At the beginning, we are presented with a reunion of two old friends. Host Lorenz and his guest, Captain Karl Schwarz, have not seen each other for thirty years. While the captain was voyaging in South America, China, and the South Seas, misanthropic "old Lorenz" set up his personal domain on the seashore, in total isolation from the world. Already the opening scene, in which the black servant serves the men cigars, coffee, and exotic fruit in an Orientalist interior, evokes an entire tableau of colonial stereotypes. Before Scheerbart discovered the potential of the astral thematic for his stories, he drew above all on the objects, ideas, and figures of, at the time, a still undifferentiated "Orient," especially on Arab, Chinese, and Japanese cultures. Intimations of European rule run through *The Sea-Serpent* and other works of Scheerbart. In any case, running alongside the ideological problematics this poses is Scheerbart's implicit effort to overcome "humanistic" assumptions—consciousness and agency as human privileges, anthropocentrism, a dichotomous conception of nature and culture—an effort manifest in a number of aspects of his text. In the first place, consciousness is not limited to human subjects. In the second place, the novel consistently questions both anthropomorphic conceptual patterns and the dichotomy between nature and culture.

As Paul Valéry had already done in *Eupalinos, or The Architect* (1921), Scheerbart uses the threshold between land and sea to explore the metaphysics of architecture. These liminal zones are the locus for Valéry's famous *objet ambigu*: a formless, riddling thing spilled up on the shore, a thing defeating Socrates's efforts to decide between its having natural or human origins. (Valéry, 1956: 110, 118) For Scheerbart, the shore is likewise a place of profound ambiguity and fluid boundaries. For the architectonic thinking of this Danzig-born author, the sea-coast paradigm had no less guiding force than had the southern French port city of Sète for Valéry. But where in *Eupalinos* the question of construction is modelled on the harbor and shipbuilding, hence on principles of naval architecture, (Siegert, 2010) Scheerbart here already pursues the idea of a colorful glass architecture rendering "human dwellings into cathedrals." (Scheerbart, 1914: 118)

A labyrinthian edifice extends from old Lorenz's dwelling on the shore. Subterranean passages lead deep down, into the interior of a stony structure toward a group of chapels. Later, spiral staircases ascend to galleries with an open view of the sea. Lorenz names the site a *Tempel des Innern*, a "temple of interiority," since his mystic *Weltanschauung* is architectonically manifest within it. In this "Laurentian" realm, religion becomes architecture, architecture religion. The temple serves the purpose of generating the greatest possible proximity to the three central divinities that, Lorenz is convinced, dwell in the Earth's interior. Just as the Earth's crust consists of land, sea, and air, he explains, "the Earth's interior consists of three spirits: one of 'blaze' or 'embers,' [*Glut*] one of stone, and a third of ether." (Scheerbart, 1962: 255) Lorenz is here by no means suggesting a simple equivalence between phenomena on the Earth's crust and in its interior. For example, Lorenz does not see the Earth's volcanic activities as stemming from the ember-god. He postulates an irreducible difference between crust and core, a difference similar to that between the snail's shell and the snail. (Ibid.: 258)

Lorenz derives his belief in the gods "from the trinity of the old religions," (Ibid.: 255) religions older than Christianity. He thinks of the Earth as an organism, but one different from either the human or non-human variants. Scheerbart is here leaning strongly on the ideas of the physicist and natural philosopher Gustav Theodor Fechner, developed in his *Zend-Avesta oder über die Dinge des Himmels und des Jenseits* (*Zend-Avesta, or: About Things in the Heavens and the Beyond*, 1851). (Brunn, 2010: 45–47) As a representative of panpsychism, Fechner viewed the Earth as an animated organism and higher being, richer and more powerful than plants, animals, and humans—which merely serve as disparate planetary organs. At the same time, they are all integrated into the Earth's superordinate consciousness in accordance with their range of psychic differentiation. (Fechner, 1901: 163) Fechner clarifies this schema with an architectonic metaphor: the Earth does not correspond to the steps of a staircase upon which human beings, animals, and plants are located; rather, it is the *house* within which the staircase has been built. (Ibid.: 195) For Fechner, this intricate connection between animated terrestrial and cosmical beings points to the responsibility of human beings to submit to their planet's developmental principle and contribute to its fulfilment.

Scheerbart already mentions *Zend-Avesta* in his article "The End of Individualism," referring to Fechner as a pioneer of his own cosmo-psychology. (Scheerbart, 1895: 1096) That psychology conveys the irony that human beings, as in their entirety—including their heads—part of the terrestrial organism, actually do not themselves in any way think. Rather, the Earth thinks through them. Scheerbart declares himself incapable of "even thinking [*denken*] the existence of a

distinctive [*apart*] human being," since he finds it impossible for two people living at mutual distance to be living independently from each other: "Through the earth and air they are interconnected." (Ibid.: 1094) For this reason, he argues, the talk of "individualities" with entirely original new ideas is "entirely absurd nonsense." (Ibid.: 1093) Here the exorbitance of Scheerbart's depiction of *The Sea-Serpent*'s protagonist becomes clear. Although Lorenz preaches cosmo-psychology, he described himself to everyone as a "distinctive [or: "unusual"—*apart*] individual." (Scheerbart, 1962: 311) He not only lives fully "encapsulated" (Ibid.: 332) but considers himself the "most profound and witty person conceivable," furnished with "unearthly [*überirdisch*] powers" (Ibid.: 318) enabling him to fulfil the role of savior—the only such organism on Earth. One element in this caricature is a strong streak of despotism—Lorenz steadily communicates through commands and promulgation.

When it comes to Lorenz's "temple of interiority," the same thing applies to it as what Valéry observes about a "singing" architecture (which is to say an architecture comprising human beings in the same way as music), tellingly explaining this through a temple: "But a temple […] forms for us a sort of complete greatness within which we live […]. In it we breathe in, as it were, the will and preferences of an individual. We are caught and mastered within the proportions he has chosen. We cannot escape him." (Valéry, 1956: 93–94)

In contrast to Eupalinos, who, in building, elevates and recognizes himself, (Ibid.: 81) through his constructions Scheerbart's architect wishes to recognize his gods and meet them. The inescapability, the enormous power, of his singing architecture is presented in the chapter titled "Storm Sirens," which shows the aerial temple, open to the sea, in action. In a storm, a space decorated with colorful cords and ropes is transformed into a swaying ship's deck; and for Lorenz, the storm-sirens, howling like enormous aeolian harps, are akin to the call of his gods.

But the building's other spaces have a similar overpowering effect—all carefully curated, architectonically, sensorily, and media technologically composed. For the creation of immersive mediated surroundings where nature and culture are complexly intertwined, auditory and tactile components play—alongside visual impressions—an important role. Spring water from the mountains moves via glass pipes first into colorfully lit fountains, then onward into the sea. The entire arrangement bristles with tentacular splendor.

Located in the cave-like space of the ember-god is "a glowing monster extending strange limbs on all sides—like avid arms. To the captain, the monster seemed like a coral tree—like a red polyp." (Scheerbart, 1962: 256) The electrically illuminated sculpture is made of glass. And since steam circulates in its glass limbs, it seems nearly animated, as

if tentacles would constantly grow from it and form face-like shapes. Aesthetically and ontologically, the metamorphoses of the divine sculpture move between the animated and inanimate and the animal and human, as well as between various emotional states that strongly affect the spectator. In its entirety, the temple facility represents a veritable gallery of drives, affects, feelings, faculties; these can best be ascribed to those setting up the symbols involved, rather than to the invoked divinities.

The system of communicating pipes presiding in the numerous fountains draws our attention to processes of communication. The imparting of an architectonic idea in Scheerbart's work has nothing in common with the wondrous orations of Eupalinos, who was able to instruct his workmen as if they were his own limbs. (Valéry, 1956: 70) Lorenz, to the contrary, reports on grave problems emerging in the course of construction. In the "temple of interiority," everything has been "merely the result of many misunderstandings"—"a torso." (Scheerbart, 1962: 311) In retrospect, he sees the main source of the misunderstandings as the fact that the sculptors "only think in a human way." (Ibid.: 263) In any case, as Fechner (1901: 159) already warned, it is inadequate to conceive of a higher psyche merely as an expansion of what is human. In line with Michel Serres' parasite theory, (1982) we might formulate the critique of anthropocentricism evident here in terms of media theory: from that perspective, Scheerbart views interruption as a constitutive element of communication; he places noise at the start of the relation represented in the constructive processes unfolding between human beings and nature. Put pointedly, the Laurentian credo is thus as follows: if architecture is present, then it only exists because its founding relation, communication itself, has failed.

The Sea-Serpent as Higher-Order Fiction

Following the inspection, the captain now finally gets his chance. His arrival on the scene has not been by chance: he was commissioned to gather information about the selfsame creature at the center of Lorenz's hopes to perfect the Earth, the sea-serpent. As Lorenz explains, the relevance of this creature to him lies in the fact that the sea reveals itself in it. (Scheerbart, 1962: 277) And Lorenz views himself, analogously, as embodying the land.

The captain's inquiries about the sea-serpent consist of a series of stories that involve second-, third- (or even higher) order information. They either constitute interpretation or require it. The old Paraguayan monk's story thus comes from an old chronicle that purportedly has been lost. (Ibid.: 270) For its part, the account by a South Sea Island resident of her encounter with the creature, offered in her native language, was only

available to the captain in German translation, which he transcribed literally. (Ibid.: 279) And the gist of an American hermit's story is so fantastical, dream-like, and humorous that in Lorenz's eyes it needs to be symbolically deciphered. (Ibid.: 277) In this manner, in all its nuances the captain's report exemplifies what Clifford Geertz has termed "thick description," meaning "a stratified hierarchy of meaningful structures." (Geertz, 1973: 7) For Geertz, pieces of ethnographic data should always be understood as "fictions, in the sense that they are 'something made,' 'something fashioned'—the original meaning of *fictiō*." (Ibid.: 15) In that light, the quasi-ethnographic contributions in Scheerbart's text represent a refined self-reflexive strategy in the sea-serpent's introduction. They establish it from the beginning as a higher-order fiction within which both this creature's poetological function and its highly ambiguous constitution are expressed.

The reports of the few witnesses registered by the captain in his notebook point to ontologically tenuous zones. In these descriptions, mutually contradictory metaphors and similes accumulate. The sea-serpent is thus first "the gulf stream," then "a widely ramified polypoid" being, "an enormous jellyfish of mile-wide expanse" "comparable to a great mass of mud," silently and immovably "bound to the depth of the sea for all time." (Scheerbart, 1962: 270ff.) In others of the captain's stories, it suddenly surfaces on the shore: once as a three-eyed white snake, (Ibid.: 280) another time as a strange yellow-headed giant fish. In that fish form, it is endowed with an almost baroque costume, a handsome ruff "of pure light blue lace" that glows "like an elegant halo." (Ibid.: 274) The hermit is said to have ascended into the animal's mouth, the lower jaw measuring "six lengths of a man," (Ibid.: 275) then finding himself in a bright yellow transparent amber head.

In the Germanic languages, amber is etymologically tied to the different variants of *Glas* (glass). Specifically, the Germanic tribes considered the initially unknown material glass, discovered through the Romans, to be a kind of gemstone and named it after their own word for transparent, yellowish amber, *Glas*. The fossilized tree resin continues to be spilled up on the Baltic coast, where great pine forests grew in the Eocene epoch; in the 19th century, an especially rich collection point was, precisely, the beach at Danzig.

This takes on relevance in Scheerbart's sea-novel when the serpent's body reveals itself as luxurious architecture with ivory stairs and a magnificent bright yellow amber waiting hall, where after a short time an electric (ghost) train arrives on the scene. In the animal's depths, its "amber skin" becomes transparent, "like water-clear glass," (Ibid.: 276) offering a free view of the deep sea's colorful activity and the wild spirits of the Earth's interior. The giant fish is, then, a surreal amusement park—one made from the material that in nature is closest to glass.

As a higher-order fiction, however, the sea-serpent remains a deeply hybrid, indeterminate and indefinable creature. It corresponds to the sea—that old cosmological embodiment of primal chaos (compare Siegert, 2010: 423)—in that, in the captain's stories, it very much alternates between animated and inanimate, organic and inorganic, natural and artificial. In this manner, the creature undermines the descriptive categories and border demarcations of enlightened bourgeois rationality. If, as Valéry writes, "to look at the sea is to look at the possible," (1975: 29) then Lorenz's longing to unite with the amorphous symbolic embodiment of the sea contains a suggestion of another wish: to dispense with the burden of determination, or more precisely, of a specific sort of being human.

The Image of the Earth: Between Similarity and Difference

As artificially reshaped nature, the sea-serpent is ascribed planetary relevance in Scheerbart's novel. This is expressed in the staging of the captain's ethno-fictional research report. To that end, Lorenz and his guest meet in a room in the residence that renders the situation a ceremony. They sit at an eight-corner table in the middle of an eight-corner room, towered over by a "domed ceiling of white frosted glass." (Scheerbart, 1962: 268) The octagonal layout cites the articulation of perfection found in sacral buildings from Late Antiquity and the Early Byzantine period onward. The combination with the dome also intensifies the sacral impression—the dome serves as a reference to the firmament as a "cosmological primal experience." (Gerling, 2013: 41) Domes of course often offer space for representing celestial scenes—the starlit sky or, say, a planetarium's projection of the firmament. Scheerbart is playing with all these associations.

From the beginning, this scene in Scheerbart's novel is centered on an object forming an almost literal pivot in Lorenz's cosmology. Hanging above the table is a large lamp in a "sea-blue glass bell, which presented itself as a globe and revolved very slowly." (Scheerbart, 1962: 268) Lorenz describes this object as "an image of the Earth"—for present-day readers thus evoking iconic images of the blue planet. He observes: "This is the way our star looks, should we be able to hover in the ether—far away from this human life. The star is blue because the atmosphere through which we see it is blue." (Ibid.: 272.)

For Lorenz, the sea-serpent is, first, the essential, creaturely representative of the sea and, second, the key to an encounter with the divinities of the Earth's interiority: "We ought not forget," he warns, "that we here wish to approach things only accessible to ordinary human sense and our conceivable tools for apprehension in an indirect way—only

through detours." (Ibid.: 279) The sea-serpent is this detour; it "becomes a medium" (Vogl, 2007: 15) both for understanding and transforming the Earth and those dwelling on it. At the same time, it points to a cosmical dispositive installed in human vision at the latest with the invention of the telescope.

As documented in *Sidereus Nuncius* (1610), Galileo already sees more than other planets when he looks through a telescope. In the moon's craters and chasms, he recognizes a thoroughly terrestrial landscape, another Earth. Joseph Vogl observes that "the concept of 'world' itself changes with this view: the difference between Earth and other heavenly bodies is erased, and the Earth itself appears as a star among stars." (Vogl, 2007: 19) Scheerbart explicitly takes up this difference in his novel and even endows it with precision. When the friends look into the night sky on the house's terrace, Lorenz draws a distinction between the world as universe and the Earth as "a very, very small portion" of it. (Scheerbart, 1962: 283) Lorenz is convinced that the Earth and its dwellers exist in a state of fundamental disharmony. The tense relationship between land, air, and sea mirrors the three divinities within the Earth's interior, who mutually tear themselves asunder. Lorenz sees his metaphysical mission as bringing about harmony by uniting with the sea-serpent: this because if they succeed in meeting as two exemplary representatives of the Earth's crust, then the air, as the third power, would automatically join in "the great accord"—in order to produce the "never before heard triad." (Ibid.: 327) The great chord would then also produce itself in the Earth's interior.

Let us pause at this point and consider a theoretical formulation of these mystical propositions. In one of his collected lectures in *Facing Gaia* (2017), Bruno Latour offers an unusual comparison. On the one hand, he outlines Galileo's procedure. On the other hand, he offers an account of the reflections of the physiologist and engineer James Lovelock. Together with his colleague Dian Hitchcock, in 1967 Lovelock was working at NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory to develop technologies for recognizing life on Mars. Instead of sending expensive space probes to the Red Planet, they opted for a far simpler and more economical strategy for observing and analyzing its atmosphere from Earth. Lovelock's suggestion involved simply testing whether or not Mars' atmosphere was in chemical balance. But as we read in Latour's account, Lovelock proceeded to extend his argument to take in the Earth: to the extent it was clear "that Mars is a dead star, since its atmosphere is in chemical equilibrium," from a Martian standpoint it would have to be equally clear "that the Earth is a living star, since its atmosphere is in chemical disequilibrium." (Latour, 2017: 78) "If this is the case," Latour continues his summary, "something must maintain this situation in place, some agency that has not yet been made visible, one

that is absent on Mars as well as on Venus and on the Moon." (Ibid.) Evidently, then, the Earth is "capable of actively maintaining a difference between its inside and its outside. It has something like a skin, an envelope." (Ibid.)

In distinction to Galileo, who in view of the moon underscored the Earth's similarity with other planets, Lovelock played down such similarity, instead emphasizing the Earth's special quality: its capacity to generate and maintain thermodynamic disequilibrium. That disequilibrium is what makes the Earth's living nature possible. But although the insights of Galileo and Lovelock are fundamentally different, in Latour's eyes they are analogously related. As is well known, Lovelock and Lynn Margulis chose the name "Gaia" to denote the unique potency of Planet Earth, its power as a living super-organism. But Latour argues that, within this theory, "Gaia" neither refers to an animated entity nor represents a holistic conception. In Hesiod's *Theogony*, he observes, Gaia is not even a goddess. Rather, she is a dark, chthonic power from the time before the Olympians. Born from chaos, she represents violence, primal origins, cunning—as Latour emphasizes, the opposite of harmony. (Ibid.: 82–83)

In light of Latour's observations, some striking parallels between Lovelock's approach and Scheerbart's fiction come to mind. The main figure in *The Sea-Serpent* assumes an irreducible difference between the Earth's outer region (Latour: "something like a skin, an envelope") and its interior, a difference defining the possibility of its animation. Importantly, the novel does not articulate this difference in thermodynamic terms. Instead, the problem of imbalance is posed in the symbolic language of a "new mythology:" as a disharmony of the Earth's interior, the unceasing struggle of divinities of ember, stone, and ether. Scheerbart as it were operates both programs that Latour will identify. Old Lorenz recognizes both the similarity between the Earth and the other planets, like Galileo, and—tracking down a constitutive below-surface imbalance—a manifest crucial difference, like in Lovelock. This tension is literally at work at the story's core. There is also a striking mythopoetic conceptual parallel: toward the story's end, Lorenz identifies the sea-serpent with the serpent of Oceanus. (Scheerbart, 1962: 347) Now Oceanus, the transmitter of Laurentian cosmology, stems from the same pre-Olympian age as does the chthonic power Gaia. In Hesiod, Oceanus belongs to the Titans, who Gaia bore.

However, the imbalance that releases salvational visions in Scheerbart's protagonists is not primarily of an energetic but rather of a moral nature. In Lorenz's words: "The Earth is like a beaten-up artwork in which the relationship between the individual parts is incorrect. It seems that the Earth can no longer overcome the disharmony. The

animals on the Earth's crust mutually devour one another—only those who can kill can live." (Scheerbart, 1962: 281) It is precisely this focus that in the end renders *The Sea-Serpent* a moral seascape.

The Laurentian Ethic of Dwelling on the Earth

The novel's morality can be given interpretive contour in two ways that exist in and through Lorenz (and in general) simultaneously. If we understand morality as a life practice in which people, communities, and behavior are measured according to specific standards, judged as correct or incorrect, good or bad, then there are two main agents of morality in the narrative. There is firstly humanity, which in the protagonists' judgment has failed to a catastrophic degree. The need of the Earth's human dwellers for salvation or a miracle is akin to a declaration of moral bankruptcy. Then there is Lorenz. As the novel's exemplary representative of the Earth's crust, Lorenz is admittedly anything but a morally superior being. He is a tyrannical figure, full of hate and disgust, incapable of any intersubjective opening—apparently hardly someone made to redeem the Earth. The novel presents this figure in a completely unflattering way. In a letter to Scheerbart, the novel's publisher, Max Bruns, addressed what he termed its "And-Coronation" (*Und-Krönung*), a reference to the fact that nearly every sentence on the last pages begins with "and." Scheerbart answered that the "often faltering figure of old Lorenz" needed to be expressed in a way containing that *"helpless"* quality. "After all, the too-violent intensifying of self-glorification actually has to result, in the end, in a doddering old man." (Scheerbart, 1990a: 92, italics Scheerbart's) And in fact, the novel successively takes apart its protagonist. It presents a fragile, scarcely mobile old man in narcissistic frenzy, plagued by dark visions, increasingly confused and mentally broken. When then, at the end, Lorenz moves out over the sea in a motorboat, in mystic union with the sea-serpent, he finds both the longed-for triad—and death. Scheerbart's human being thus does not vanish "like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea," (Foucault, 1994: 422) but like a dead man travelling "inexorably" in his motorboat "on and on, straight ahead." (Scheerbart, 1962: 354) Scheerbart has this human being dissolve within the dark waves of the sea or, to use Serres' phrase, within noise itself.

We can also understand morality in critical-genealogical terms and move back to the concept's origins. Within the Greek origins of our word "ethics," we may discover a bifurcation between the word ἔθος (*ethos*), denoting usage or custom, and ἦθος (*ēthos*), denoting both dwelling and character. Whatever our reading of the particular historical-ideological backdrop and premises of Heidegger's early postwar writing, taken on

its own terms, that writing was oriented around this distinction, for the sake of circumventing what he viewed as an anthropocentric understanding of ethics. In that framework, in his "Letter on Humanism," (1949) Heidegger considers Heraclitus' Fragment 119, ἦθος ἀνθρώπωι δαίμων (*ēthos anthrōpōi daímōn*), problematizing a popular and, in his view, anachronistic translation of that phrase, in order to then propose an alternative:

> 'A man's character is his daimon.' This translation thinks in a modern way, not a Greek one. ἦθος [*ēthos*] means abode, dwelling place. The word names the open region in which the human being dwells. The open region of his abode lets what pertains to the essence of the human being, and what in thus arriving resides in nearness to him, appear. The abode of the human being contains and preserves the advent of what belongs to the human being in his essence. According to Heraclitus' phrase this is δαίμων [*daímōn*], the god. The fragment says: the human being dwells, insofar as he is a human being, in the nearness of god. (Heidegger, 1998: 269)

Within this particular interpretive framework, we might understand Scheerbart's protagonist as acting ethically in that he shapes the open region of his abode on Earth, his transition from this world to the next one, in such a way that he can be near to his gods: to the fearsome, passionate, and mighty divinities often operating as tentacular monsters. He has a labyrinthian edifice built on the seashore, a site in which demons can make an appearance. Consequently, Lorenz does not enter into the condition of homelessness in the midst of the existant that Heidegger derives from the non-poietic impact of modern technology, the non-emergence of the sustenance-endowing new.

For Scheerbart, technology does not impact human beings in the manner of Heidegger's *Gestell*, the "framework" or essence of technology, its dynamic of "ever-expanding demand for production, stockpiling, and consumption." (Bambach, 2013: 116) Lorenz's immersive mediated surrounding consists of poietically shaped—through *technē*—spaces for abode; it is thus a living-space within the existant allowing proximity to the absent, closed-off, unfamiliar. *The Sea-Serpent* doubtless offers a fascinating early manifestation of Scheerbart's utopian glass-architecture. The hybrid titular figure shimmers, in turn, on the ontological threshold of indeterminacy; the creature also draws human beings into a zone of fluid borders, a locus preceding any split between nature and culture, material and discourse, the animated and inanimate, organic and inorganic. In doing so, it paves the way for those metamorphic astral creatures that Benjamin praises for their "dehumanized" nature.

Notes

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